

1 Papa's Chair

‘Everything ready?’

‘I think so... something’s bound to get left behind, however much we rack our brains now.’

‘Buckets, spades, cool bag full of fruit, towels, sun creams, credit cards, maps, OK, OK, let’s be off.’

It’d been a long week, but it was worth waiting for Sunday. We were going to have a real beach day. The kids were unbearable, but they were on the back seat. The kids are always unbearable, even more so when they’re going to the beach. But their mother was keeping them in line. And so I could concentrate on my steering-wheel, my road, and on we went.

I liked taking my lot to the beach. It was good to see them enjoying themselves. The missus would spread the towel and lay there sprawled out to act as a landing-strip for solar waves, in spite of everything she’s been told about that skin cancer business. I’d put my little dogs-that-bite-the-hand-that-feeds-them, Nico and Laura, down on the sand, they’d make castles, knock them over, throw sandballs at each other, cry, go in the water, cry, some of the sandballs would come our way, you’d shout at them, they’d cry again, and finally they’d come crying to look in the lunch-boxes for something to eat. It was like a film you’ve seen a thousand and one times, so by now you know the ending off by heart, yet at the same time it was unexpected. Oh you’re crying, surprise surprise! The missus, red as a lobster, would point at the basket and carry on sunbathing.

As for me, in situations like this I was one of the happiest of men, sitting in my deck-chair, in my untouchable deck-chair. I’d spend hours like that, reading the

newspaper, in my straw hat, sitting listening to the football scores. You break your back working all week, because shifting bricks isn't child's play, sometimes I even do overtime, it isn't easy to make ends meet, it's these hard times we've been born into, damn blast and bugger it, but once the weekend comes, if there's one thing everyone knows it's that Papa's chair is Papa's chair. My deck-chair, it's much more than a contraption to sit in, it's the reminder that Papa needs to be treated nicely every so often. To enjoy the occasional privilege, that's why he's Papa. And it's a symbol of my authority, too, I'm the head of the household and that's clear from Papa's chair. The affairs of this life require a certain order, some hierarchy. Papa's chair is the throne, it's the centre of a beach day.

This time we weren't going by ourselves - my wife, Rosa, she's a right chatterbox, she'd made friends with a lady doctor who was married to a gentleman doctor and they'd just had a beautiful baby girl. And how did they meet? This is a fundamental question if you live in Britain, in other words how the wife of let's call him a 'layer of bricks' can become the friend of a lady doctor married to a gentleman doctor. Easy, the lady doctor's the health visitor at a school where my wife's a dinner lady. And since they both like a good chat, they got on well, and the latest bright idea they've come up with is that people ought to fraternize and go to the beach together, so I, the brick-master, had to make conversation with the syringe-master.

We lived in the East End of London, not a bad place if you're working class. Most of the Galician emigrants had taken it into their heads to live in the north-west, infected perhaps by some geographical virus that took them from the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula to the north-west of London. I'd laid my hat there, too, for the first few years, but then I moved to the east in search of cheap housing and building work. At first I'd lived in the Notting Hill Gate area, Portobello - round there Latin

Americans, Spaniards, blacks from the West Indies, Galicians, Portuguese all did all right, it's as if someone had put a little bit of each of us into a blender and after a good blend the result was the area around Notting Hill Gate. It wasn't bad there, it was a good place for making contacts and switching jobs, and for getting produce and news from home. Lots of Galicians were living there for good, others weren't.

When me and Rosa decided to put a proper roof over our heads, we thought it was a good moment for a change of air. Those were the golden years for the housing market, Señora Margarita had made up her mind that every English family mustn't be content just to have a roof over its heads, but must own it too. The state offered tax reductions to encourage people to buy houses, and the market exploded. That was when I turned up in the East End.

I did all right in that neighbourhood. There was a gang of us doing up houses, we'd buy houses that needed refurbishing, and after working on them for no more than a fortnight they were up for sale again. We weren't living in the golden age of the building industry, but you got by. My gang were reliable, two Pakistanis and a bloke from Albacete, Hussain, Hussain and Joséín, but we called him Alba to avoid confusion.

From the East End we had to drive further into London to pick up the doctors in Kentish Town; this was because Johni, the syringe-master, knew the way to some empty beaches. Johni and Crisi were still at the stage of drooling over their newborn little girl. They'd soon get over it, when the sleepy hours begin to build up, goodbye pub, goodbye peace and quiet, but as yet they were still on their honeymoon, let them be. This gaga stage can last for up to a fortnight. To be honest, there isn't a better age - sucking, sleeping and shitting. They don't ask questions about sex yet, that's the

critical moment. But Johni and Crisi still had a few nappies to change in the meantime. Why spoil the festa for them?

I'd assumed they wouldn't be waiting for us at their front door. Cristina was breast-feeding the baby, and mister doctor was having a stretch after a short nap. He'd been on duty for seventy-two hours. Is that possible? More or less, every so often you have a snooze. I hope it isn't while you're at work with your scalpel.

My little animals went and sat down and started looking for something to break. Rosa, with all her long experience, went upstairs to give advice, and Johni took me outside to show me a dent in his car. It hadn't worked properly ever since it got the dent, anyway they'd been thinking about trading it in for some time now. They had a new house, they'd just had a baby, and they were going to buy a new car. I wouldn't mind being a doctor. The car doesn't work, so get yourself a new one. The house is getting too small, well then let's buy a bigger one. We were behind the schedule I had in mind, but I tried to calm down because it was clear it was going to take even longer. He went back to the seventy-two hours.

'Is seventy-two hours possible?'

'What would you all say to a good breakfast... there's nothing like a good breakfast... to start the day.'

Eleven in the morning and the syringe-master is taking his breakfast. Breakfast for everyone, sausages, bacon, beans, toast and fried eggs, lend me a hand over here and a hand over there. Da-dah! - the house of plenty. Look what a lovely little girl, and aren't your children good eaters. I hope he doesn't think I'm starving them. My children will eat a horse if they're given the chance, specially in other people's houses to make us look poor. And what a big house, lots of room for them, for the baby, for

their guests, for the toys, and a room for ironing in, and for the children that God sends. Who wouldn't, working seventy-two hours?

We'd left home at ten, and at twelve on the dot Johni was wiping his mouth with a serviette. I hope he doesn't want to have a sesta. Rosiña was trotting up and down the stairs all excited. When women smell nappies full of baby shit they all go crazy. Not me - as far as I'm concerned shit is shit, whether it's baby shit or not, and the only effect it has on me is to make me feel like going out into the garden for a breath of fresh air and a fag. Time was going by. Johni had said on the phone that in less than an hour we'd be out of London and dipping our toes into the water. He must have been talking about the water in his cistern. At exactly three o'clock in the afternoon, give or take a minute or two, we were in the middle of a motorway, surrounded by other motorways, dual carriageways and everything connected with cars in any ways at all. Rosa was telling me we had to bear with them, they'd just had a baby.

Johni got out of the car, rubbed his head and said his mother had been told that driving north-east you couldn't go wrong, there were plenty of empty beaches, do you mind waiting a bit for Crisi to breast-feed the baby?

Of course we don't mind, it's only Sunday, the day I've been waiting for all week to go to the beach. Of course we don't mind! Not only didn't we mind, we even parked our cars in one of those motorway services and I crossed the line I never should have crossed. I did what until then I had never done, I set foot in one of those McBollocks. I wasn't disappointed. It was what I'd always imagined - after your last bite you were as hungry as on your first nibble. That stuff was bread and air, mustard, and tomato sauce without tomato. The coca-colas were large, true, but they were full of air bubbles as well, and they weren't giving them away either. What a Sunday.

Mister doctor, who had a new house, a new baby, who worked seventy-two hours on the trot and who would soon have a new car, left his credit cards in his car, so muggins here paid the bill.

Finally we were on the motorway again, driving towards some wonderful empty beaches someone had told Johni's mother about, and she had told Johni about, and Johni had told us were over towards the north-east. My little kiddiwinks were getting rowdier and rowdier and Rosa's shouting had stopped having any effect. We came off the motorway and drove down a side road trying to follow that hazy thing called north-east. I was at the end of my tether. I felt like smashing the steering-wheel so as not to smash somebody's head in, and soon Johni flashed his indicator to stop at a petrol station.

A couple of characters on a motor bike answered our questions, exchanging astonished, blank looks. In the end they gave us the directions. This time I pulled out in front and told Johni to follow me.

We went down a country lane. We drove through a small town and carried on to where they'd directed us. There were fewer and fewer houses and there were meadows stretching out on either side of the lane. In the distance you could make out a huge grey building right by the side of the sea. The lane was narrow and at the end of it you had to stop in a car park. As soon as we began to get out we noticed that an intense humming was coming from the building. Johni got out of his car and asked if we'd read the notice, it's a nuclear power station.

Some people were walking towards the only other car parked there. They got in and drove away. We were about to take the things out of the car and wondering what you did in situations like this. It was four in the afternoon, it wasn't as if you

could get back in the car and go looking for another empty beach. We decided to head for the beach.

By the car park there was a very neat and tidy garden that you had to walk through to get to the beach. A little notice said the garden had been created courtesy of the nuclear power station company. The garden had fencing all around, streams with little stepping stones ran through it. It all seemed sort of very natural, like those highly natural parks where they take city children so they can find out about nature. Nativity-scene nature, with grass, little streams, stones, bridges with wooden railings, all very natural, you see, but without any bramble-patches, cow-pats or horseflies. The fact is the garden suited the nuclear power station and the nuclear power station suited the garden. If we'd been in an art gallery, looking at a picture, it'd doubtless have been called a still life, and if it wasn't still it'd have to be stilled.

Each of these thoughts or similar ones must have been going through all our heads because nobody said a word, even my little scallywags weren't kicking each other. There was the sense of a lunar landscape about it, of plastic surgery, of science fiction, of fish fingers, it was as if something was missing but there was too much of something else, yet at the same time it was a perfectly balanced landscape. The humming wasn't loud, it was within the bounds of what the human ear could stand. In this it was very respectful, too, like the natural garden. We ourselves were becoming a part of the balance, walking along with our stuff towards the beach, all so tiny beside the huge building.

I'd never seen anything like it. I never thought such a place could exist. Yet it brought back memories. It brought back memories of science-fiction films from the sixties. Some scientists are going through the jungle and suddenly what looked like a tree-trunk turns out to be the leg of a giant bird. It brought back memories of a picture

by Castelao they'd taken to the Centro Galego, where a man like a tiny little dot was walking along a beach and this side of the beach there were some enormously tall pine trees. I felt just as tiny. A tiny shadow in the middle of a perfect world; it was as if we'd passed through an invisible veil to enter a landscape imagined by somebody.

We were all too astonished looking around us to talk or complain about the long trip. The beach was deserted. It was the beach with the finest sand I'd ever seen in these islands. It was nothing like the black pebble beaches in the south of Scotland, or the shingle beaches in the south of England. It formed a kind of cove and it was sheltered. The water was crystal clear and with little waves like when the northeasterly's blowing in the Ria de Noia and it feels like a cold knife is cutting through your ankles.

We were all on the sand still holding our stuff, but nobody knew exactly what to do. Crisi sat down on the sand with the baby in her arms, and Johni sat at her side. I looked at my lot and waved my arms as if to say what are you waiting for, but my gesture wasn't very convincing, and I didn't send out any words of encouragement with it, either. Then I left my things on the sand and Rosa and the children dropped their stuff too. We were slowly taking our shoes off, spreading our towels out, all looking at each other as if afraid that suddenly the others would run away and you'd be left there alone.

Crisi and Johni sat a little apart with the baby. In the end I said, 'What are we waiting for, we're on the beach.' My little monsters were a bit nervous, they seemed to want to scratch as if they had some illness, but they didn't dare move away, either, to start throwing sandballs. I opened my chair and sat down, and Rosa stretched out on her towel. The children edged their way towards the water without taking their

eyes off us. And Johni and Crisi seemed to be immersed in their new love that looked like a fig.

I was trying to concentrate on reading the paper, but I couldn't get through a single item of news. Every so often I'd look up from the paper, to look around, to check that it was all real, that things were as I'd seen them the first time, that it was true. The humming was almost inaudible, you had to stop and listen hard to notice it was there. Rosa was tossing and turning on her towel. I decided to get up and go and see if there was a notice saying that this beach was not for public use. As soon as I put my sandals on my little monkeys came running to ask where I was going, they were afraid I was about to leave without them, and I persuaded them to stay put. I left the sand. There was a footpath parallel to the beach, but I couldn't see any way to the road we'd come along. There was just a path that led to a farmhouse close to the road.

I sat on the slope to look around. A tractor was driving across the fields and turning on sprinklers that began to spray water in great circles. On the path we'd come down, which seemed to be the only path to the beach, there wasn't any warning sign. There wasn't any sign at all that we were in danger, if you ignored that humming, and the grey monster and the loneliness of the solitary beach.

I went back to my lot, to tell them there wasn't any need to be worried. I went slowly, walking on a grass so green I couldn't remember ever seeing anything like it before. When I got to the beach they were all standing there, in their clothes, waiting for me, in order to leave. Nobody was saying anything, as if everybody was waiting for somebody to say what they all wanted to say. Something like 'let's go'. Johni and Crisi were doing some sort of little dance around their daughter that looked like a sultana. They had come to the beach, they had sat down and they would leave, as if something was pulling them. They didn't seem to know where we were, or where

we'd come from, or where we were going. I wasn't angry, not that I didn't have good reason, but I wasn't in any state to get angry with anything or anyone.

It was a strange situation and a strange place, there was something too much and something missing. And that something too much was exactly what was missing. It was like a beach day without a beach. It was like enjoying something that gives no pleasure. Like sitting on a beach-ball without any ball. There was a not very intense hum, the loneliness of a beach, some extremely green grass, a park too much like a park, and a couple too much like doctors, with a new house, a new daughter, and soon a new car.

Before I realized it we were all sitting in the car. We all felt some sort of relief, seeing we were putting more and more kilometres behind us. For the first time all day I'd noticed the existence of a landscape. It was on both sides of the road. Everything seemed like a dream. Nothing had happened, really. Papa's chair! It had been left on the beach. Nobody had picked it up. All alone, gazing at the solitary beach. With a man sitting in it, invisible, non-existent. Without any man to sit in it. Without me. The headlights of the oncoming cars were more and more intense and insolent and their horns were more and more strident and Papa's chair had been left on the beach. A tenth of a second of silence and light. All I could feel was that I was falling upwards into emptiness, as if the force of gravity was laughing at me. All the organs in my body thudded against my ribcage.

By the sides of my ears everyone was screaming and crying. They were all dear voices that fled and hid as if slipping away through secret caves and footpaths and then re-emerged to explode again, thousands of glass splinters embedding themselves in my brain.

And then it all ended. It all finished. No more noise. Absolute silence. I sense that I exist and that my dear ones are somewhere close to me, I can sense them as if they were my own flesh. I exist and we exist in some kind of state or essence. But no part of me moves. Neither I nor my thoughts seem to have any third dimension. All is absolute and cold rigidity. There's a bench in front of me, and every so often someone sits down and looks at me thoughtfully. Sometimes groups of people come up, sometimes people come one by one. You can see they're people of different races, and many of them have cameras hanging from their necks. They come to look from close up and then they move away with a finger on their lips, thoughtful, and look from a little further off. Others don't, others walk straight past, and look all around. They look at the many pictures in the room and ignore me.

Published in the Anthology of Galician writers From the beginning of the sea,
www.foreigndemand.net